

Libraries and the New Basics

by Christine Corso

INTRODUCTION

The New Basics

Often we hear that students need to learn their “3Rs” (reading, writing, and arithmetic), a term that was coined over 200 years ago. Despite the term’s age, the 3Rs are a very popular concept and right now in Ontario we have been hearing that schools need to get “back to the basics”. But the students who entered kindergarten in 2019 will graduate in 2031, and they are going to need a new set of skills and competencies to thrive in the world than people did in the 1800s. Kids today need a new set of basics.

People for Education (People for Education, 2020), has been thinking a lot of about the future. We have been thinking about the seismic shifts around us that have already occurred or are occurring. Technology, political polarization, the world of work, and climate change are some of the many drivers of change across society right now. In order to prepare students, our education systems need to respond to these shifts.

Many jurisdictions are already working on redesigning public education, even within Canada. Saskatchewan Teachers’ Federation (STF) released a report and 12 recommendations for evolving the province’s public education system in November 2019 (STF, 2019), the Québec curriculum is largely focused on skills rather than knowledge (Gouvernement du Québec, 2007), Manitoba is hosting consultations to improve the future of public education (Manitoba Education and Training, 2019), British Columbia introduced a competency-based curriculum in 2015 (Government of British Columbia, 2016), and New Brunswick has released a green paper with action items that include incorporating artificial intelligence into classrooms (Government of New Brunswick, 2019).

Since 2013, People for Education has been working with experts, stakeholders, and educators to define what skills and competencies students will need in the future. Though they are sometimes referred to as global competencies, 21st century skills, or transferable skills, we have called them “The New Basics” (People for Education, 2019). The New Basics are: developing a sense of self and society, thinking creatively and critically, learning to learn, collaborating, and communicating effectively.

The Importance of Learning Opportunities

If these, rather than the 3Rs, are to be the new set of basics in school, then the way in which we teach children must be interrogated. For example, we need to look at where learning happens, how assessment is carried out, and what teachers are trained to do.

Providing quality learning environments in which students can learn is vital to the development of The New Basics. Students cannot develop skills and competencies if they are not given an opportunity to practice them. It is important that students have a wide variety of learning opportunities including arts education, collaborative learning experiences, physical activity, community-connected learning, and opportunities to participate in a democratic environment (Bascia, 2014). And these opportunities can take place throughout the school - not just in the classroom.

Library Learning Commons as Collaborative Learning Spaces

Learning Commons are the natural homes of collaborative and interdisciplinary work, which are the types of learning opportunities that foster The New Basics. The Canadian School Libraries standard about designing learning environments specifically states that the Library Learning Commons should be a collaborative space, both virtually and physically, that is designed to foster creativity and innovation (Canadian School Libraries, 2018). That same Learning Commons model has also fundamentally changed the role of the teacher-librarians, who are not just bookkeepers, but also facilitators of competencies, research skills, and technical knowledge (Rizk, 2018).

The Current Paper

This paper reports the longitudinal trends in school library staffing across the province of Ontario. As education leaders increasingly acknowledge the importance of competency-based learning, do elementary and secondary schools have the human resources needed to support collaborative Learning Commons spaces? This paper uses results from the Annual Ontario School Survey from 1998 to 2019 (People for Education, 2020a), to see if school resources are keeping up with discourse about the importance of learning The New Basics.

METHODS

The Annual Ontario School Survey

Annually for over 20 years, People for Education has surveyed Ontario's publicly funded elementary and secondary schools to learn about the resources and programs that are available across the province. Since 1998, People for Education has been asking schools about their library staff. The findings in this paper are based on the subsection of questions from the Annual Ontario School Survey related to libraries (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Library questions from 2019 Annual Ontario School Survey

2. LIBRARY
Teacher librarian(s): _____ total FTEs
Library technician(s): _____ total FTEs

Does your board have a policy to staff the school library with:

Teacher librarians only Library technicians only Teacher librarians and library technicians
 Other (please specify): _____ There is no board-wide policy regarding school library staffing

Please describe any successes or challenges with the library at your school: _____

In the past, surveys were mailed to school principals, completed by pen and paper. In recent years, principals have completed the survey online. Both elementary and secondary principals from public and publicly funded Catholic schools are invited to participate.

In 2019, data collected from the survey was also matched with the median household income (before tax) for each school's Forward Sortation Area (i.e. the first three digits of the school's postal code). This income data was based on the 2016 census. For geographic comparisons, in 2019 schools were classified by region (i.e. Eastern Ontario, Central Ontario without the Greater Toronto Area, the Greater Toronto Area, Southwestern Ontario, and Northern Ontario). In 2016, schools were classified as either small town/rural or urban/suburban using postal codes. Small town/rural schools are located in jurisdictions with under 75,000 people and not contiguous to an urban centre greater than 75,000 people. All other schools were classified as urban/suburban schools.

All data were analyzed using SPSS statistical software and descriptive statistics are presented. Calculations have been rounded to the nearest whole number and may not add up to 100% in displays of disaggregated categories. Quotes included in the results section are provided by principals through an open-response section included in the survey (see Figure 1).

In 2019, People for Education received 1,254 responses from elementary and secondary schools in 70 of Ontario's 72 publicly funded school boards, representing 26% of the province's publicly funded schools. This is consistent with previous response rates (n=~1200 annually). Survey results were also disaggregated by region, and regional representation of survey responses corresponded well with the regional distribution of Ontario's schools.

The majority of the results were originally published in *Connecting to Success*, People for Education's report on technology in Ontario's schools (People for Education, 2019) and some were a part of *The Geography of Opportunity*, People for Education's 2016 annual report on Ontario's publicly funded schools (People for Education 2016). All survey responses and data are kept confidential and stored in conjunction with Tri-Council recommendations for the safeguarding of data (Government of Canada, 2018).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

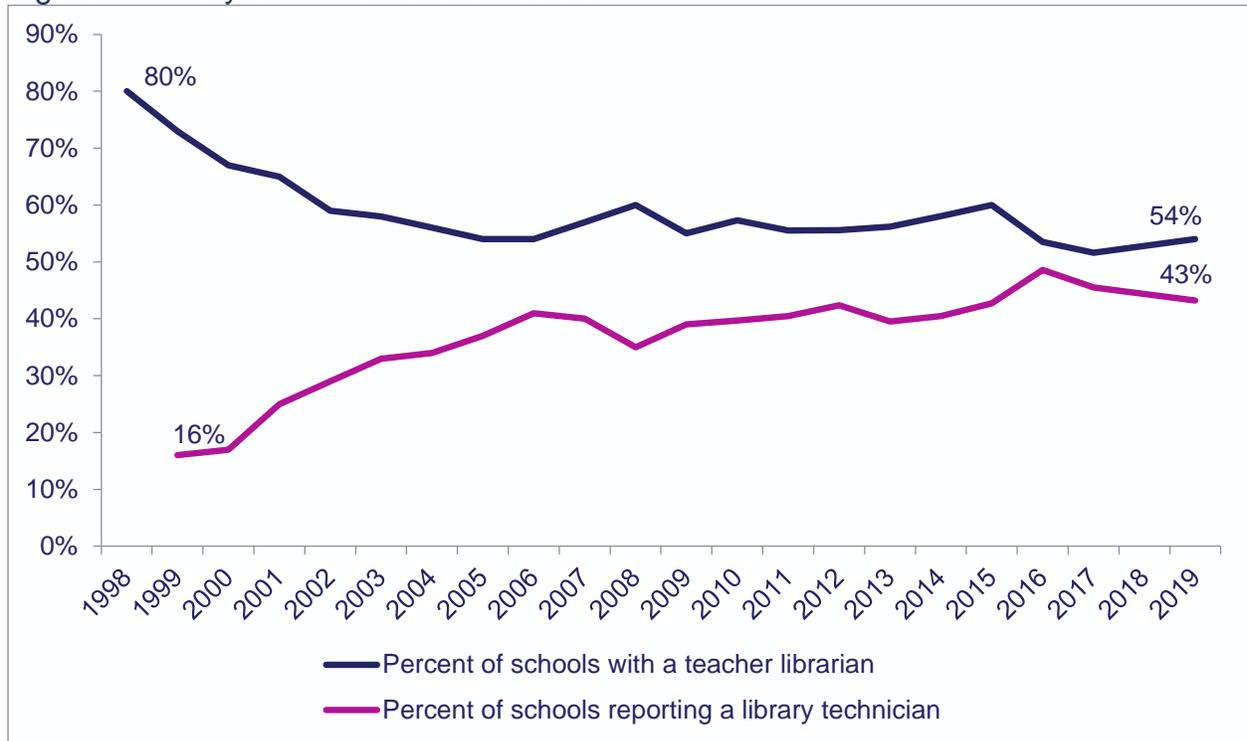
Fewer and fewer teacher librarians

Libraries can be staffed with a wide range of individuals, be they library technicians, clerks, teacher-librarians, or community volunteers. Library staff will therefore have different levels of expertise and experience with respect to managing a library, teaching information literacy, and scaffolding participatory learning activities in a library commons. Different staff also have different responsibilities. Library technicians are responsible for developing, maintaining, and organizing library resources, whereas teacher librarians work with classroom teachers in the planning, teaching, and assessment of students. In Canada, library technicians play a supporting role and operate between a clerk and a librarian (Canadian Library Association, 2011), while teacher librarians are Ontario certified teachers with specialist qualifications in librarianship (James, Shamchuk, and Koch, 2015).

Over the last 20 years, teacher librarians in elementary schools have been steadily declining, while library technicians have been increasing. In 2019, 54% of elementary schools had at least one full or part-time teacher librarian, compared to 80% in 1998 (see Figure 2). Forty-three percent of elementary schools report having a library technician in 2019, compared to 16% in 1999.

In general, in 2019, principals reported that their library staff contributed to the school community. However, many felt they did not have adequate access to library staff. For example, one principal from York Catholic District School Board said, “Not enough hours to fully utilize it as it is becoming so much more than a library—maker space, learning commons, robotics, etc. Teacher-librarian role is so important, and we do not get enough of her!” Another elementary school principal from Halton District School Board said, “We would like our library to be a learning commons and HUB for our school. Difficult when we only have a teacher-Librarian for 1/3 of the instructional day.”

Figure 2: Library staff in Ontario schools over time

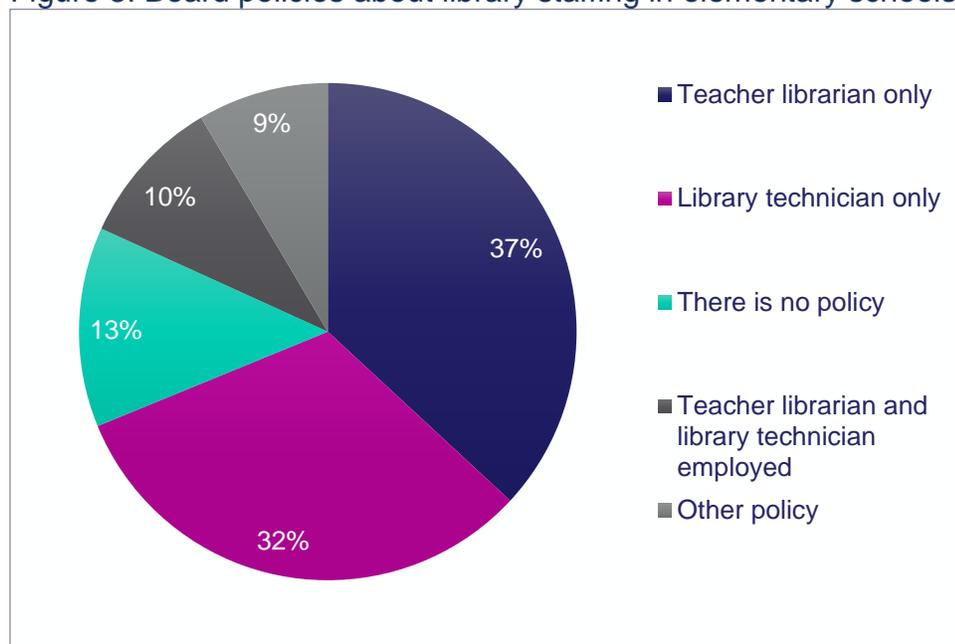


Many Boards Have Policies about Staffing

The above trend may be partly attributable to salary differences. School boards receive funding from the Ministry of Education for one teacher-librarian for every 763 elementary students and one for every 909 secondary students, at the rate of \$76,210 before benefits (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2018). By contrast, the average annual salary for library technicians ranges from \$30,000 - \$60,000 (Payscale, 2019). Teacher librarians are also salaried staff, while library technicians are typically paid an hourly wage.

Given the flexibility of the funding provided for library staff, school boards have different policies about what type of staff to hire. In 2019, People for Education asked principals how their boards generally staff school libraries (see Figure 1 for questions). The majority of schools reported that their boards had some sort of hiring policy—whether it be to hire only library technicians or teacher-librarians. Thirty-seven percent of elementary schools report that their board staffs libraries only with teacher-librarians, while 32% report that the policy is to staff libraries only with library technicians (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Board policies about library staffing in elementary schools



There Are Regional Differences in Staffing Practices

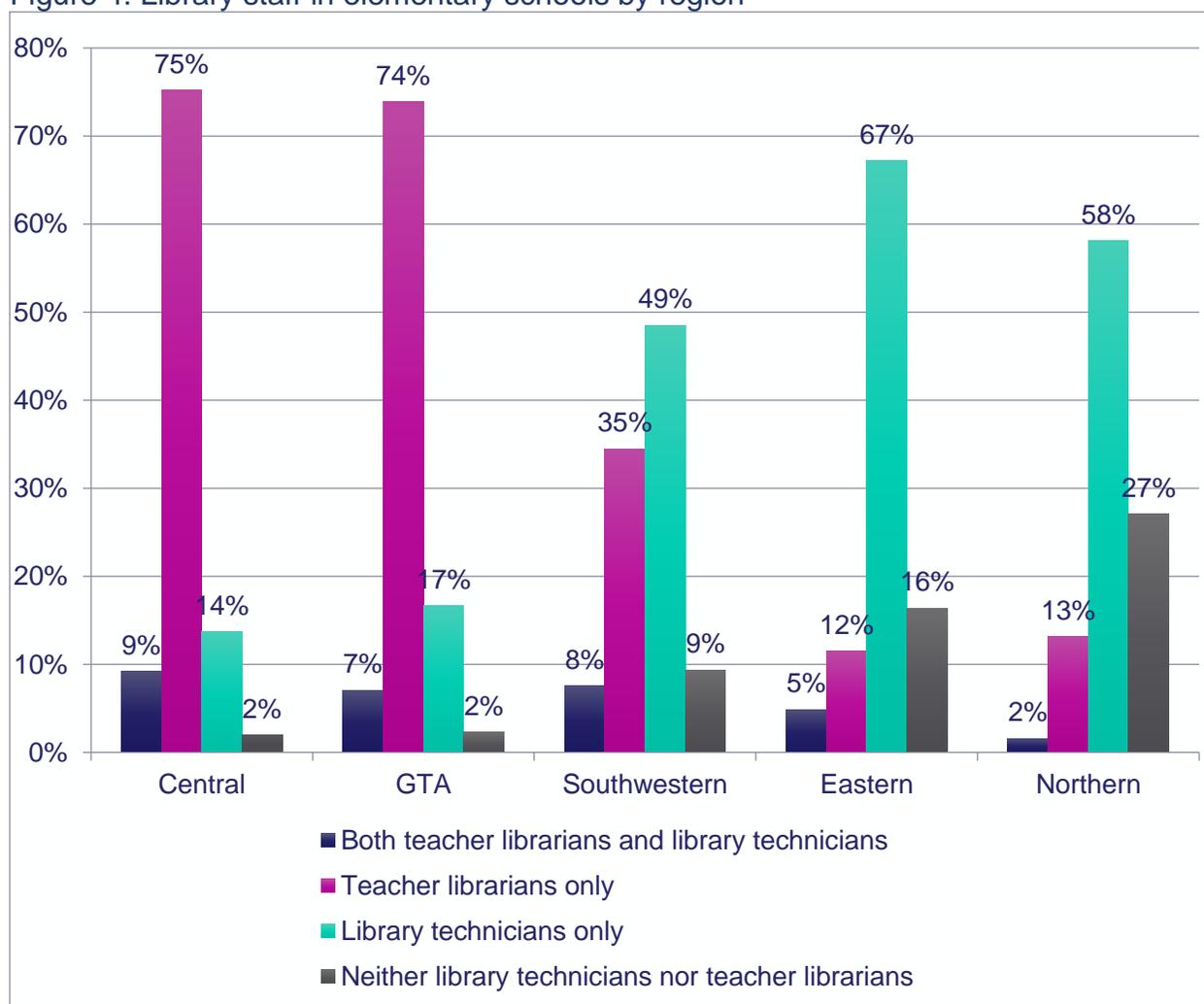
Library staffing practices and policies seem to vary across the province. In 2016, People for Education’s survey found that 60% of elementary schools in urban/suburban communities had a teacher-librarian, compared to 44% of small town/rural schools. And 53% of elementary schools in small town/rural areas report having a library technician, compared to 46% of urban/suburban schools.

In 2019, the survey results indicate that schools in Central Ontario and the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) are more likely to be staffed with only a teacher-librarian, while those in Eastern and Northern Ontario are more likely to be staffed with only a library technician (see Figure 4). In Northern Ontario, 27% of schools have neither a library technician nor a teacher-librarian.

Differences in library staffing also exist along socio-economic lines. Sixty-three percent of schools in high-income neighbourhoods report a teacher-librarian, compared to 48% of schools in low-income neighbourhoods.

As discussed above, funding is provided to boards on a per pupil basis. Therefore, boards with more students may be more likely to hire teacher-librarians at a higher salary over library technicians. Schools in more densely populated regions are more likely to have teacher-librarians, who are trained to plan lessons, teach, and assess student learning.

Figure 4: Library staff in elementary schools by region



CONCLUSION

Educators and experts agree that education must shift to better prepare students for the future. An important part of this shift is to include areas of learning beyond the “3Rs”; curriculums must focus on a new set of basics that include transferable competencies and skills. In order to develop these New Basics, students must have opportunities to develop a sense of self and society, think creatively and critically, learn to learn, collaborate, and communicate effectively. The model of the Learning Commons put forward by Canadian School Libraries presents a natural space to foster The New Basics, however an important component of this model is the librarian.

Over the past 20 years, there is a growing trend away from hiring teacher-librarians in favour of library technicians. In rural and remote parts of Ontario, elementary schools are less likely to have teacher-librarians than in urban or suburban areas. However, with an increasing push for broader and deeper skills, students now need librarians with more specialized training and in roles more embedded in the school environment – not

less. As the importance of these broader competencies grows, it becomes more important for schools to have teacher-librarians across Ontario, not just in central Ontario and the Greater Toronto Area. As The New Basics become increasingly important in schools, we must ensure that all students have access to the learning opportunities they need to develop a broad set of competencies and skills.

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